

It was wanderlust that led Penelope Williams into the culinary world. Originally from England, her family migrated to Australia when she was seven. After finishing high school, she travelled for six months through South Asia. A chance encounter in Nepal – where she showed her hosts how to whip up macaroni and cheese in a microwave – kicked off a quest to share her love for food that continues even today. Since then, the 41-year-old has worked in London's legendary Savoy Hotel and Australia's top restaurants. Today, she owns Bali Asli, her own restaurant and cooking school in Bali, where she serves up traditional fare using local ingredients cooked on wood-fired, mud-brick stoves.

What was it like starting out at the famous Savoy Hotel in London?

I was just 18, working 16 hours a day, and one of three girls among a hundred-strong team in a very testosterone-driven work environment. There



Penny Williams sees it as her mission to create a place that allows diners to see and taste traditional Bali. **FACING PAGE:** Ares, a soup made from banana trunk (top); ikan bakar sizzles on the grill (below).

eat, play, love food

After 20 years in the business, chef Penelope Williams has found her home in Bali, where she indulges her passion for the island's rich food traditions. **By Tracy Lee-Elrick**



was lots of shouting, cursing, racism and sexism. It wasn't uncommon to see grown men fighting in the kitchen or crying in the changing rooms. Once, a guy who'd just quit threw his shoe into a pot of sauce as a parting gesture.

So how did you maintain your sanity?

You don't – you join in. I'd cuss and swear and give as good as I got. You can't come across as a weak person or everyone will use you as their punching bag. You just have to be extremely disciplined, and get everything done properly and quickly.

What did you learn from chefs like Dietmar Sawyere, Serge Dansereau and Jared Ingersoll?

Dietmar taught us to tastefully gel Asian flavours with European cooking techniques, and I was inspired to leave my mark as a passionate, skilled female chef. Serge is amazing with people. In the four years I worked with him, I never heard him raise his voice – that's inspirational! I was at Danks Street Depot with Jared, and being such a small establishment gave us the opportunity to engage with the farmers, growers and small providers. I found it really exciting to use the freshest ingredients and to hear from the people who work on the land.

How is working in Bali different from the UK and Australia?

The learning curve at Alila Manggis (where I worked





ABOVE: Guests try *tuak*, a local palm beer. RIGHT: Foodies learn how to whip up local favourites (top); Bali Asli's picturesque backdrop of Mount Agung, the island's most sacred mountain.

previously) was as steep as Mount Everest. You have to nurture people, keep your cool, not raise your voice, control your emotions, and not be in a hurry!

You immersed yourself in the Balinese way of life, picking up Bahasa and even the local dialect. Was it the same for the food?

I got known as the crazy woman at the market – the one always asking about this and that ingredient. If a vegetable was usually eaten for its leaves, I'd eat the root to see if it was any different. Someone introduced me to a local seed called *pangi*, which is used to make a black, savoury soup. I kept insisting it smelled truffle and chocolatey, and finally someone challenged me to create a dessert using it. So I did – making a fondant topped with chocolate.

Why do you say Balinese culinary traditions are in danger of extinction?

I'd ask to borrow a grill used in traditional *banjar* (Balinese ceremonial feasts), only to be told that locals used caterers instead of preparing meals themselves. Or I'd show an unusual herb or spice to a local colleague, only to hear his grandmother used to cook with them, but that no one really used them any more.

Most foodies know their *sate* from their *tempeh*. But you're into more unusual dishes, so what are some must-tries at Bali Asli?

Try *ares*, a soup made with banana trunk, and *tum*, which is pig's blood with coconut milk, ginger, garlic and chilli, steamed in a banana leaf. It's Bali's answer to blood sausage, just not as meaty. Or order fish: fresh fish is one of my favourite ingredients to work with. And join our "A day in the life" classes, which take you off the beaten path to experience local sights and tastes like *tuak* (a local palm beer) or for the truly adventurous, *lawar*, a local salad which uses raw pig's blood as dressing.

Do you live the expat high life complete with a thatched-roof villa and infinity swimming pool?

I so do not. My home is more like a one-room bed-sit with a mattress on the floor, one light, one table, no TV, and a 2 sq m bathroom with a cold shower. I live like a local!

Chef Penelope Williams will conduct cooking demonstrations at ONE°15 Marina Club in May. Please check XXXXXX for more details. 

